

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 COME-00 EB-07 LAB-04 SIL-01 TRSE-00 OMB-01
/071 W

-----132054Z 109015 /73

P R 131940Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASY PARIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2795
INFO AMCONSUL BORDEAUX
AMCONSUL LYON
AMCONSUL MARSEILLE
AMCONSUL NICE
AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: FR, PINT, ECON
SUBJ: BARRE - MITTERRAND TELEVISED DEBATE

REF: PARIS 14123

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER BARRE AND PS LEADER FRANCOIS MITTERRAND ENGAGED IN A MUCH HERALDED TELEVISED DEBATE ON MAY 12. THE SUBJECT OF THEIR DEBATE WAS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY ECONOMIC, WITH A BRIEF PART AT THE END CONCERNED WITH FOREIGN AFFAIRS. EACH MAN SCORED A NUMBER OF POINTS OVER HIS OPPONENT. THE ONLY OVERALL CONCLUSIONS THAT CAN BE MADE ARE THAT PRIME MINISTER BARRE MAY HAVE ENHANCED HIS POLITICAL STATURE SOMEWHAT, AND THAT MITTERRAND MAY HAVE BEEN HANDICAPPED BY SOME POSITIONS OF HIS PCF ALLIES. END SUMMARY.

1. THE BARRE-MITTERRAND DEBATE HAS BEEN HAILED AS THE
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FIRST TIME THAT A PRIME MINISTER IN OFFICE HAS PUBLICLY AGREED TO AN OPEN CONTEST WITH A LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION. TENSION MOUNTED IN THE DAYS PRECEDING THE DEBATE, WITH EACH SIDE CLAIMING THAT THE OTHER WOULD BE A PUSH-OVER. THE OPPOSITION PLACED ITS HOPES ON THE CURRENT DIFFICULT STATE OF THE FRENCH ECONOMY, ON HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURES AND ON POTENTIAL SOCIAL UNREST, ALL OF

WHICH COULD BE SUPPOSEDLY LAID AT THE FEET OF THE GOVERNMENT MAJORITY. IN ADDITION, MITTERRAND HAD THE ADVANTAGE OF LONG EXPERIENCE IN POLITICS AND OF HAVING DEBATED A NUMBER OF LEADING FRENCH POLITICIANS IN RECENT YEARS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHOM IS PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING HIMSELF. BARRE, ON THE OTHER HAND, PLACED HIS HOPES IN THE ECONOMIC EXPERTISE, THE INHERENT WEAKNESS IN THE COMMON PROGRAM, AND THE STATURE THAT ACCOMPANIES HIS POSITION AS PRIME MINISTER.

2. THE DEBATE LASTED MORE THAN TWO HOURS AND CONCENTRATED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY ON ECONOMIC MATTERS AND THE COMMON PROGRAM. MITTERRAND LOST DEBATING POINTS IN FOUR MAIN AREAS:

-- HE ADMITTED THAT HE WAS NOT IN AGREEMENT WITH THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED PCF FIGURES FOR THE ACTUALIZATION OF THE COMMON PROGRAM (REFTEL). NOTE: PS OFFICIALS TOLD EMBOFFS PRIOR TO THE DEBATE THAT MITTERRAND OBVIOUSLY COULD NOT AGREE WITH THE FIGURES, BUT THAT HE WOULD NOT BE ULTIMATELY HURT BY EXPRESSING SUCH DISAGREEMENT. MANY OBSERVERS IN BOTH THE MAJORITY AND THE OPPOSITION THINK MITTERRAND COULD EVEN BENEFIT BY TAKING HIS DISTANCE FROM THE PCF.

-- MITTERRAND MAY HAVE FREIGHTENED SOME OF THE MOST MODEST ELEMENTS OF THE UNION OF THE LEFT (I.E. THE LEFT RADICALS) BY ADMITTING THAT HE WOULD NOT SEEK TO ELIMINATE FROM THE COMMON PROGRAM THE SECTION WHICH ALLOWS WORKERS IN A PRIVATE ENTERPRISE TO REQUEST NATIONALIZATION OF THE BUSINESS IN QUESTION.

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-- MITTERRAND TACITLY BACKED DOWN ON THE LEFT'S PUBLIC CLAIMS THAT IT COULD REDUCE UNEMPLOYMENT IN FRANCE TO ZERO PERCENT WITHIN FIVE YEARS. THIS IS SO MANIFESTLY IMPOSSIBLE THAT BARRE HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN DISCOMFITTING HIS ADVERSARY ON THIS POINT.

-- THE OVERALL DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN THE PS AND PCF AS TO HOW THE COMMON PROGRAM SHOULD BE INTERPRETED, REVEALED ITSELF OFTEN ENOUGH IN THE COURSE OF THE DEBATE TO LEND FURTHER SUPPORT TO THOSE WHO ACCUSE THE COMMON PROGRAM OF BEING MAINLY AN ELECTORAL GIMMICK.

3. BARRE ON THE OTHER HAND LOST HIS OWN SHARE OF DEBATING POINTS:

-- HE DECLARED HE WAS IN FULL ACCORD WITH MAJORITY POLICIES (WHATEVER THAT MEANS) THEN TURNED AROUND AND BLAMED HIS PREDECESSOR IN MATIGNON FOR LAXITY IN DEALING WITH PRESSING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

-- ON THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND BARRE, A KNOWN ADVOCATE OF STABLE BUT ADJUSTABLE EXCHANGE RATES,

WAS HARD PUT TO DEFEND THE GOF POSITION OF GENERAL AGREE-
MENT ON THE JAMAICAN ACCORDS. HIS ONLY DEFENSE WAS TO
SAY THAT IT WAS NECESSARY FOR FRANCE TO PARTICIPATE IN

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INFO AMCONSUL BORDEAUX
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SUCH ACCORDS, DESPITE GOF'S RESERVATIONS, BECAUSE
FRANCE CANNOT ISOLATE HERSELF FROM THE INTERNATIONAL
ECONOMY, AND BECAUSE OVERALL THE ACCORDS PERMIT INTERNA-
TIONAL COOPERATION.

-- FINALLY FRANCOIS MITTERRAND REMAINED FOR THE
MOST PART COURTEOUS AND COLLECTED, BARRE A COUPLE OF
TIMES LAPSED INTO PETTY SARCASM AND AGGRESSIVENESS.

4. CONCLUSIONS: WHILE IT WOULD BE INACCURATE TO SAY
THE DEBATE WAS WON BY RAYMOND BARRE, THE GENERAL CONCLU-
SION AMONG MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION ALIKE SEEMS TO BE
THAT MITTERRAND WAS NOT IN HIS BEST FORM. BARRE BELIED
THOSE WHO ACCUSE HIM OF BEING NON-COMBATIVE IN THE POLI-
TICAL ARENA AND SHOWED HE COULD HOLD HIS OWN AGAINST
ONE OF THE FOREMOST DEBATERS IN FRANCE. WHILE OBSERVERS
AGREE THAT THE POLITICAL ROLE OF BARRE AND MITTERRAND
BETWEEN NOW AND THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS WILL BE
LITTLE AFFECTED, THERE IS A GENERAL CONSENSUS THAT THE
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PS LEADER, BY DINT OF HAVING LOVER A LONG PERIOD OF TIME
DEBATED ONLY THE TOP GUNS, IS INCREASING HIS STATUS AS
A POLITICIANS. ONE ALMOST HAD THE IMPRESSION THAT
MITTERRAND WAS THE (SHADOW) PM FORCED TO DEFEND HIS
POLICIES AND BARRE THE CHALLENGER TRYING HARD TO MAKE
UP LOST GROUND. THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC'S NAME
CAME UP ONLY ONCE, WHICH TO A CERTAIN EXTENT REVEALS
HOW ISOLATED GISCARD IS. JACQUES CHIRAC MAY BE MOMENTAR-
ILY ECLIPSED IN HIS EFFORTS TO PRESENT HIMSELF AS THE
UNDISPUTED LEADER OF THE MAJORITY, BUT IT IS UNLIKELY
HE WILL REMAIN SO FOR VERY LONG. TO SUM UP: THE FACTS
AND FIGURES CONTAIN LITTLE THAT WAS NEW; BARRE REVEALED
HE'S AS GOOD A STREET FIGHTER AS THE VETERAN POLITICI-
ANS; THE DEBATE WILL HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON THE LONG
RANGE COURSE OF FRENCH ELECTORAL POLITICS. GAMMON

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